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ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper discusses various approaches used in providing feedback on student writing performance. It identifies four categories of feedback--positive versus negative, task-related versus task-unrelated, moderate versus extensive, and teacher-provided versus student-provided--and reports research findings related to each category. The paper then reports on a study in which 82 prospective and experienced elementary language arts and secondary English teachers were assessed regarding their practices in, and attitudes toward, providing feedback to students. Analysis of the results indicated that the majority of the subjects provided feedback that was negative, task-unrelated, extensive, and teacher-provided; that the majority of subjects believed that the types of feedback that were effective were positive, task-related, moderate, and teacher-provided; that the majority showed discrepancies between attitudes and practices; that more of the experienced than of the inexperienced teachers showed openness to alternative types of feedback; and that more prospective elementary teachers than prospective secondary teachers showed openness to alternatives. (GW)

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# PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES IN PROVIDING INFORMATION ON WRITING PERFORMANCE

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate practices and attitudes involved in providing feedback on writing performances, as one aspect of instruction in writing. In the study, feedback was defined as information on performance which affects subsequent performance.[1] Effects may be to increase (or strengthen), decrease (or weaken) or maintain the performance. This general definition can encompass such practices as "marking," "correcting," and "grading." The definition can also encompass alternative practices, such as responding to a student's writing without noting errors, and having students measure their own writing. Responses of four groups were analyzed: prospective and experienced secondary English teachers and prospective and experienced elementary language arts teachers.

## Background of the Study

This study was motivated by classroom teaching and observation; discussions in methods books and in articles on evaluating, and responding to, writing; and research. Five assumptions underlie the study. (1) There are many different ways of providing feedback to writing. (2) There are particular practices which are common. (3) Experimentation with alternatives to these common practices is a fairly recent phenomenon. (4) Teachers generally do not carefully consider their practices in providing feedback; that is, they do not clarify how or why they are providing feedback in particular ways. (5) One result of this assumed lack of consideration is inconsistencies in responding to writing.

Two studies lend some support to the assumption that there are in-

consistencies. Burton and others report a study of secondary English teachers who graded, and wrote comments on, compositions.[2] The teachers differed greatly in their evaluations and in their criteria for evaluation. Each paper received grades of A through F. In a study by Kline, secondary and college composition teachers were asked to indicate (1) their emphases in writing assignments, (2) the content of classroom instruction, and (3) their emphases in responding to students' writing.[3] Inconsistencies were found among all three elements of instruction. For example, some teachers who were concerned with expression of personal feeling indicated a high priority for marking spelling errors and spent no class time on spelling.

Reference to recommendations of four educators illustrate the point that there are a variety of approaches--and conflicting approaches--to providing feedback. Burton and his co-authors present four ways of "evaluating" student writing, and recommend the fourth: "marking" "to assign a grade," "to indicate faults," "to correct," and "to teach writing and thinking."[4] In the last, the teacher"transforms most of his comments into questions meant to begin a dialogue between the writer and the reader." [5] The second, third, and fourth approaches have in common, extensiveness; i.e., every problem is responded to, problems involving style, structure, and content. Dunning recommends "grading" or "marking" as a means of instruction, but he calls for selectivity, i.e., comments should focus on a limited number of problems.[6]

All of the approaches in Burton's discussion involve responses from the teacher. Dunning suggests the possibility of peer-responses in recommending that students write for their peers and others. Moffett and Macrorie[8] explicitly recommend and emphasize peer-feedback.

## Research on Feedback

Wolter and I have reviewed research on writing instruction for findings and implications on providing feedback.[9] Our general conclusions were: First, the research has major limitations. Relatively few studies addressed the problem of feedback and attempted to control for variables of feedback. These studies were limited in number and ability level of students and in types of writing done by students. In earlier studies, feedback was involved but not controlled for,nor even fully described in reports of the research. Second, given these limitations, there has been no support for a number of practices, some support for alternatives to these practices.

Wolter and I established categories of feedback, which can be viewed as potentially conflicting alternatives: positive versus negative, task-related versus task-unrelated, moderate versus extensive, and teacher-provided versus student-provided. The following presents definitions of these categories and research findings for each. These categories were employed in the study reported in this article.

## Positive Versus Negative

Positive feedback is defined as information on desirable behaviors; e.g., "good spelling," "95% of your words are spelled correctly," "well-developed paragraph." Negative feedback is defined as information on undesirable behaviors (or the lack of desirable behaviors); e.g., "SP," "8 misspellings," "more detail needed." Wolter and I found it useful to distinguish between "negative" feedback and "corrective" feedback. The former simply notes the presence of the problem; the latter also notes a problem but provides some sort of help in correcting the problem in the

future. For spelling, corrective feedback could consist of providing the correctly spelled words, or providing a "tip" for proofreading, e.g., "Next time, proofread for all words that have ie and ei." For content, corrective feedback could be: "Next time, provide more details that answer the question--What happened?"

Three studies involved negative feedback but focused on the effect of revision. Fellows found no significant differences between a group who revised papers after they were corrected by the teachers and a group which received no comments and did not revise; the first group did exhibit more gains.[10] Buxton found significant gains in some behaviors for a group which revised papers after receiving negative and positive comments, when compared with a group who did no writing and a group whose papers were commented on but not revised.[11] Effros did not find significant differences in an attempt to replicate Buxton's study.[12] McColly found no significant results for a group receiving immediate, negative feedback.[13] Burton and Arnold found no significant results for groups receiving different amounts of negative feedback.[14] Bata found no significant results in a study comparing the effects of marginal and terminal corrections.[15]

Seven studies investigated positive feedback. Clarke, Gee, Stevens, and Kelly reported more favorable student attitudes given positive over negative feedback, but none reported significant effect on writing improvement.[16] Biberstine reported that negative feedback resulted in negative student attitudes, and that positive comments lost value if included with negative comments; no data on writing improvement was presented.[17] Schroeder reported greater gains for groups receiving positive and corrective feedback over groups receiving negative feedback;

he did not report significant gains.[18] Wolter reported significant improvement for two groups receiving positive and corrective feedback.[19]

Task-Related Versus Unrelated

Both in practice and in research, students do not merely write. Rather, they write in response to particular assignments or tasks. Tasks differ in number, type, and difficulty of expectations; for example, a formal, polished essay versus free writing , as described in Macrorie.[20] Task-related feedback is information on only those skills or qualities identified in the assignment; task-unrelated is information on skills or qualities not specified. For example, students might be asked to write freely and try to write as much as they can in ten minutes. Task-related feedback would be on number of words written. Feedback on spelling, sentence structure, even content, would not be task-related.

The idea that students do not have to be responsible for every aspect of writing, but rather can focus on only those explicitly presented in the assignment appears new and in contradiction to common practice. Only two studies deliberately and explicitly limited the feedback to that directly related to the task.[21] The exact assignment was presented in the reports of the studies; both the feedback and the data collected were strictly limited to the requirements of the assignment. In Wolter's study, a control group received no feedback; three groups, receiving task-related feedback, showed significant pre-post gains and significant differences over the control group.[22] In Lamberg's study students showed significant pre-post gains; no control group was used.[23]

Moderate Versus Extensive Feedback

The amount of feedback students receive has been investigated. Extensive feedback is information on all aspects of writing, from style to structure to content. Moderate feedback is limited to a few aspects of writing. Moderate and task-related both involve less information than does extensive. With moderate feedback, however, the information is not necessarily limited to the requirements of the assignment. For example, a teacher might arbitrarily decide to comment on sentence structure, even though students had not been told to work on that aspect in their assignments.

The study by Burton and Arnold, mentioned earlier, compared the effects of moderate and extensive feedback; in both cases negative. They used the terms "intensive evaluation" and "moderate evaluation."[24] They found no significant results for either. The other studies involving negative feedback, discussed earlier, also involved extensive feedback; in Buxton's study, for example, students received information on ten aspects of writing.[25] For this study, moderate feedback was information on three or fewer aspects of writing; extensive, on four or more.

Teacher-Provided Versus Student-Provided

With teacher-provided feedback, students receive information from the teacher, usually written comments or marks on the paper; sometimes oral comments. Student-provided feedback can take two forms. Peers can read each other's papers and provide oral or written information. Or, students can provide themselves with information; in this study the term "self-provided" is used. For example, students could count the number of words they have written or the number of words they believe

are spelled correctly; or they could check off certain criteria in a checklist. Quantitative information is commonly recorded on graphs or progress records, sometimes called "feedback systems."[26] Students can also evaluate the content of their writing.[27]

The vast majority of studies on instruction in writing, generally, and on feedback on writing, have involved teacher-provided feedback. A few have used peer-feedback; two, self-provided feedback. Allen and Sutton and Pierson found no significant differences between peer-provided and teacher-provided feedback groups.[28] Lagana and Ford did find significant differences in favor of peer-provided groups over teacher-provided feedback.[29] Sager, Millet, and Alpren found significant differences in favor of peer-feedback groups as measured by ratings of writing.[30] These last three studies might also be considered as investigations of task-related feedback. In all three, a particular rating scale was used to serve as a control on the type of feedback and kind of writing students practiced.

Wolter had two groups receiving teacher-provided feedback and one group providing themselves with feedback.[31] All three groups used the same checklist, which identified criteria for the assignment. All three groups showed significant, positive pre-post gains and significant differences over the no-feedback control group. There were no significant differences between self-provided and teacher-provided groups. Lamberg found significant pre-post gains with self-provided feedback.[32]

Summary of Research

In summary, no statistical support has been found for the effectiveness of negative, task-unrelated, or extensive feedback in improving writing

performance. Some support has been found for the greater effectiveness of positive and corrective over negative feedback in improving writing performance. There is support for the effectiveness of positive feedback in improving attitudes towards writing. The majority of studies using student-provided feedback have found support for the effectiveness of that practice. There is support for task-related over no feedback. Braddock's conclusion is worth noting: "research has so far given no clear indication of the most efficacious way to mark papers...."[33]

The Study

This study was concerned with practices and attitudes in providing feedback, rather than with the effect of feedback on student performance. Three questions were addressed:

1. Given a simulated assignment and a student's response to that assignment, what types of feedback would subjects provide?
2. Given a questionnaire which listed, defined, and gave examples of, alternative types of feedback, which types would subjects choose as effective?
3. What would be the relationship between subjects' practices (in #1) and their attitudes (in #2)?

Subjects

Prospective teachers were students enrolled in courses in the teaching of elementary language arts and secondary English. There were 20 prospective secondary teachers and 22 prospective elementary. Twenty-one experienced secondary teachers participated in the study as part of a five-hour workshop on the teaching of writing. Nineteen experienced

elementary teachers were enrolled in a graduate course in the teaching of language arts. For all four groups, the study was conducted prior to any training in, or discussion of, feedback or evaluation.

## Procedures

Subjects were given a general definition of feedback and the same sample assignment and student's response, presented in Figure 1. They were told to pretend they had given that assignment. They were not asked to provide feedback; rather they were asked to indicate (1) how feedback would be provided to the student, and (2) what feedback would be provided. To insure understanding of the task, subjects were very briefly given alternatives: they could write comments or mark the paper; they could present comments orally to the student; they could have the students comment on their own or each other's papers. The feedback could consist of editing symbols, or other marks (such as underlining), corrections, comments, or questions.

After the subjects had completed the first task, they read the list of alternative types of feedback. They were asked to write the numbers of the types they believed effective. They did not have the opportunity to change their responses to the first task.

## Limitations

Data on practices was derived from a simulated situation rather than an actual classroom situation. Only one sample of writing was used, one which had numerous writing problems. Data on attitudes was derived from expressions of belief in certain practices presented as alternatives.

Prospective teachers were limited to students at one university. Experienced teachers were those who were seeking more training (through workshops and graduate study). No control was attempted for different amounts of experience.

## Collection and Analysis of Data

The same checklist and sample assignment were used as a guide in categorizing and recording subjects' responses to the first task; i.e., the simulated assignment. Two individuals were employed in categorizing and counting the responses. A comparison of their work showed 97 percent agreement in categorizing the practices of the subjects. (Where there was disagreement, an average of the judges' counts was used.) For the second task, the measure of attitudes, the numbers written by the subjects were recorded.

A count was made of the total number of subjects who provided each type of feedback and who chose each type as being effective. Percentages were computed for each group of subjects providing and choosing each type of feedback. Statistical treatments were not employed since there was no intention to test hypotheses.

## Results

### Positive Versus Negative Feedback

Practices. Most subjects provided negative feedback. As presented in Table 1, 78 provided negative; 19, positive. No subjects provided only positive; 16 provided both. More experienced subjects, secondary and elementary, provided positive than did inexperienced. Table 2 presents percentages in each group providing positive and negative feedback.

Attitudes. There was some disagreement between attitudes and practices. More subjects, 43, chose positive as being effective than provided it. Fewer, 5, chose negative than provided it; 4 chose both. Data are presented in Table 1. There was agreement among secondary subjects, experienced and inexperienced. There was agreement among elementary subjects. Higher percentages of elementary subjects chose positive than did secondary. Table 3 presents percentages.

Task Related Versus Unrelated Feedback

Practices. More of the feedback provided was unrelated to the task than related. Unrelated information addressed such matters as spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and capitalization skills not specified in the assignment. Related feedback addressed amount of detail, length, and numbers of incidents. As presented in Table 1, 43 subjects provided task-related feedback; 69, unrelated; 33, both. A higher percentage of all secondary subjects provided unrelated feedback than did elementary. Percentages are presented in Table 2.

Attitudes. As presented in Table 1, 38 subjects chose task-related as effective; 4, unrelated; one, both. Fewer subjects chose task-related than provided it. 40 subjects chose neither. As presented in Table 3, in all groups, higher percentages chose task-related over unrelated.

Moderate Versus Extensive Feedback

Practices. As presented in Table 1, 61 subjects provided extensive feedback (i.e., information on four or more skills); 21 provided moderate.

A higher percentage of secondary subjects provided extensive than did elementary subjects, as presented in Table 2.

Attitudes. Far fewer subjects chose extensive feedback than provided it. As presented in Table 1, 9 chose extensive; 16, moderate; 57, neither. Higher percentages of experienced subjects, than inexperienced, chose moderate, as presented in Table 3.

Teacher-Provided Versus Student-Provided Feedback.

Practices. As presented in Table 1, most subjects, 80, indicated use of teacher-provided feedback; 15, use of both teacher-and-student-provided. None indicated sole reliance on student-provided. A higher percentage of experienced teachers than inexperienced indicated use of student provided. Table 2 presents percentages.

Attitudes. In expressing attitudes, more subjects chose student-provided feedback than indicated they would use it. As presented in Table 1, 46 chose teacher-provided; 67, student-provided; 28, both. As with practices, higher percentages of experienced than inexperienced chose student-provided. Table 3 presents the data.

Discussion

This study addressed questions about practices and attitudes in providing feedback on student writing. Data consisted of responses to a simulated writing assignment and a questionnaire. Subjects were prospective and experienced secondary and elementary teachers.

What types of feedback would subjects provide? The majority of subjects provided feedback which was categorized as: negative, unrelated to task, extensive, and teacher-provided. More experienced than

inexperienced subjects, both elementary and secondary, provided positive feedback. Fewer prospective secondary subjects provided task-related feedback, than in other groups. Fewer secondary subjects, both prospective and experienced, provided moderate feedback, than did elementary subjects. No subjects indicated sole reliance on student-provided feedback, but more experienced than inexperienced indicated use of a combination of teacher-and-student-provided feedback. There were more instances of use of self-provided than peer-provided feedback.

What types of feedback would subjects choose as being effective? The majority of subjects chose these types of feedback as effective: positive, task-related, and moderate. More secondary than elementary subjects chose negative feedback. Few (10 percent and less) chose feedback unrelated to the task. There was less agreement on teacher-and-student-provided feedback. More secondary subjects than elementary chose teacher-provided. An equal number of prospective elementary subjects chose both teacher-and-student-provided. More experienced elementary chose student-provided than teacher-provided.

What relationship would there be between practices and attitudes? For all types of feedback and for the majority of subjects in all four groups, there were inconsistencies between types of feedback provided (practices) and types chosen (attitudes). Fewer subjects chose as effective types they had provided; more subjects chose types as being effective than provided them. The greatest inconsistency was found with positive and negative feedback. The least inconsistency was found with teacher-versus-student-provided feedback.

Conclusions

Five generalizations are supported by the results: (1) The majority of prospective and experienced secondary and elementary English and language arts teachers provided feedback which was negative, task-unrelated, extensive, and teacher-provided. (2) The majority of subjects chose as effective feedback which was positive, task-related, moderate, and teacher-provided. (3) The majority showed discrepancies between attitudes and practices. (4) More experienced subjects than inexperienced showed openness to alternative types of feedback. (5) More prospective elementary subjects than prospective secondary showed openness to alternatives.

Implications for Further Research

Three studies would be of interest. First, it would be desirable to study practices in a classroom situation to see if inconsistencies and variability among teachers would be found, in actual practice. Second, it would be interesting to attempt to discover why experienced teachers and elementary teachers show more openness to alternatives. For example, if further attitude studies are done, subjects could be asked why types of feedback were chosen as effective. Third, the author has assumed that inconsistencies in providing feedback are undesirable; likewise, Burton and his co-authors express concern about teacher variability in grading.[34] It would be useful to investigate consistency of feedback as one variable in instruction in writing.

Table 1

Numbers of Prospective and Experienced Teachers Providing and Choosing Types of Feedback N=82

| Types | Provided | Chosen | Types | Provided | Chosen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | 19 | 43 | Moderate | 21 | 16 |
| Negative | 78 | 5 | Extensive | 61 | 9 |
| Related | 43 | 38 | Teacher | 80 | 46 |
| Unrelated | 59 | 4 | Peer/Self | 15 | 67 |

Table 2

Percentages of Prospective and Experienced

Teachers Providing Types of Feedback

| Types | Prospective Secondary N=20 | Experienced Secondary N=21 | Prospective Elementary N=22 | Experienced Elementary N=19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | 00 | 38 | 18 | 37 |
| Negative | 95 | 95 | 100 | 89 |
| Task-Related | 05 | 76 | 77 | 47 |
| Unrelated | 95 | 95 | 82 | 63 |
| Moderate | 05 | 19 | 27 | 42 |
| Extensive | 95 | 81 | 73 | 58 |
| Teacher | 100 | 95 | 100 | 95 |
| Peer | 00 | 05 | 00 | 05 |
| Self | 00 | 29 | 09 | 26 |

Table 3

Percentages of Prospective and Experienced

Teachers Choosing Types of Feedback

As Effective

| Types | Prospective Secondary N=20 | Experienced Secondary N=21 | Prospective Elementary N=22 | Experienced Elementary N=19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | 40 | 43 | 64 | 63 |
| Negative | 10 | 10 | 5 | 0 |
| Task-Related | 60 | 48 | 41 | 37 |
| Unrelated | 10 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Moderate | 10 | 29 | 18 | 21 |
| Extensive | 25 | 10 | 9 | 0 |
| Teacher | 70 | 62 | 55 | 42 |
| Peer | 25 | 43 | 18 | 58 |
| Self | 25 | 48 | 55 | 58 |

Situation: You are teaching an English or language arts course which includes units on grammar, writing, and literature. You gave the following assignment:

> Write a narrative or story about an interesting experience that happened to you. Choose an incident that happened during less than one day. Develop the incident by providing specific details that answer these questions: What happened? Who did it happen to? Who else was involved? When did it happen? Where did it happen? Why did it happen? Try to write at least one page.

| Student's response: | Jerry Lee |
|---|---|

One summer, My family and I went on a trip to Florida. Went thru Illinois. Ohio, Kentucky. We stopped at Lincoln's home in Illinois. Wher they have the place he grew up in. We saw some old baots on the Ohio river. Then we had an accident. Then we got to florida. And went to Disneyworld.

Figure 1. Simulated assignment and student response.

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